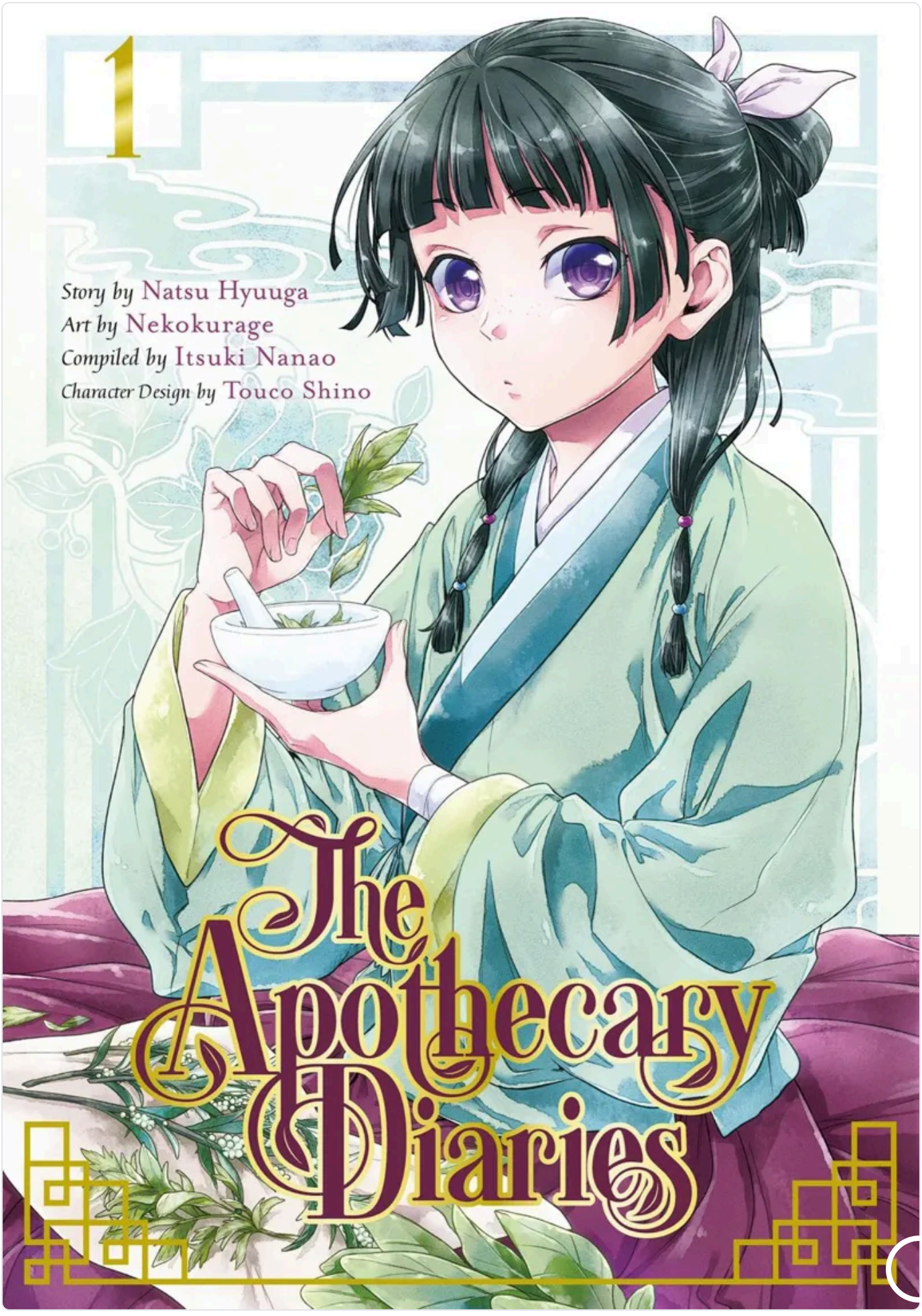
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Compiled by Itsuki Nanao
Character Design by Touco Shino
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The Apothecary Diaries

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GOSH, I COULD SURE GO FOR SOME STREET-STALL MEAT SKEWERS RIGHT NOW.
MAIDSERVANT OF THE INNER COURT
MAOMAO

Chapter 1 The Curse of the Inner Court

ONE DAY, WHEN I WAS OUT IN THE FOREST PICKING MEDICINAL HERBS...
...I WAS MADE OFF WITH MOST INCONVE-NIENTLY BY KIDNAPPERS.
IT'S ALREADY BEEN THREE MONTHS SINCE THEN...
DEPRESSED
ちーん.
DAD ...
HAAH...
I HOPE YOU'RE EATING PROPERLY ...
THE STIFLING REEK OF COSMET-ICS...
BEAUTIFUL ROBES, FAKE SMILES...

...ARE NOT ALL THAT DIF-FERENT.
THE PALACE AND THE PLEASURE DISTRICT...
...THE INNER COURT IS SEPARATED FROM THE REST OF THE PALACE.
A GARDEN OF WOMEN TO BEAR THE EMPEROR'S CHILDREN...
...AND THE EUNUCHS...
...THOSE WHO, HAVING LOST A CERTAIN "TREASURE," ARE NO LONGER CONSIDERED MEN.
MEN ARE EXPLICITLY FORBIDDEN TO ENTER.
THE ONLY EXCEPTIONS TO THE RULE ARE THE EMPEROR HIMSELF, HIS BLOOD RELATIONS...

IT JUST HAD TO HAPPEN WHEN I'D FINALLY BECOME AN APOTH-ECARY TOO...
WHETHER I WAS SOLD INTO SERVITUDE OR SENT IN THE PLACE OF ANOTHER, I KNOW NOT...
BUT I'D HOPED TO LIVE OUT MY YEARS NEVER ONCE GETTING INVOLVED WITH THE INNER COURT.
17
壱七
THE NEXT ONE IS FOR THAT LOW-RANKING CONCUBINE WHO'S ALWAYS COOPED UP IN HER CHAMBERS, HMM?
8

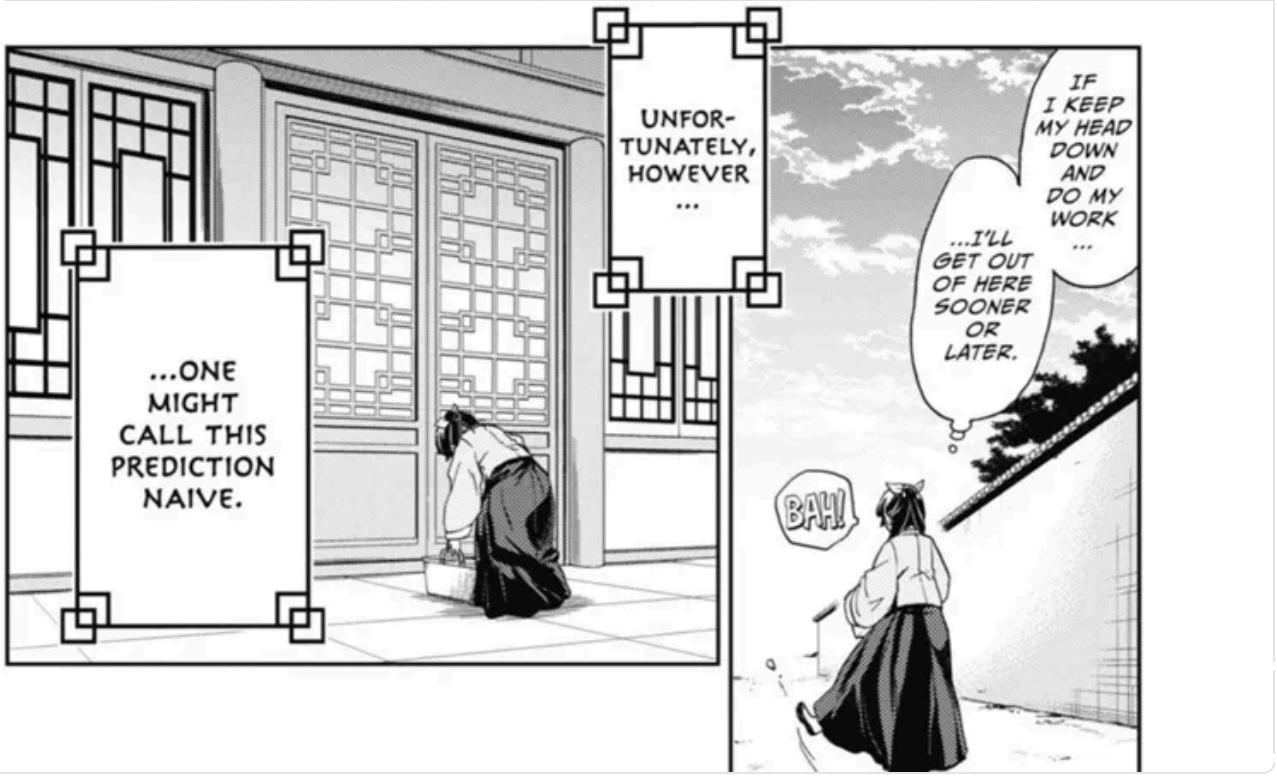
...MM.
PSST, THIS TAG...
CAN YOU TELL ME WHICH CHAMBER IT'S FOR?
九
九
OH, OVER THERE! YOU'RE A LIFE-SAVER!
...IT'S THAT WAY.
IT HAS WISTERIA AND A NINE, SO...

LIKE HER, MOST OF THE WOMEN HERE CAN'T READ.
TEACHING EVEN HALF OF THESE COUNTRY GIRLS TO READ WOULD BE QUITE THE ACHIEVEMENT.
...BUT EDUCATION IS A WHOLE OTHER STORY.
IN PREPARATION TO WORK AT THE PALACE, ETIQUETTE IS DRILLED INTO EVERYONE BEFOREHAND...
...GONE ON TO BECOME LOW-RANKING CONCUBINES.
DESPITE THIS, MAIDS LIKE MYSELF HAVE, ON RARE OCCASIONS...

ALL YOU NEED ...
...IS A PRETTY FACE.
FRECKLES
.....
FLAT AS A BOARD
NOT THAT I'M INTERESTED OR ANYTHING...
...YOU CAN COUNT ME OUT.
FRECKLED FACE AND A SKINNY FRAME

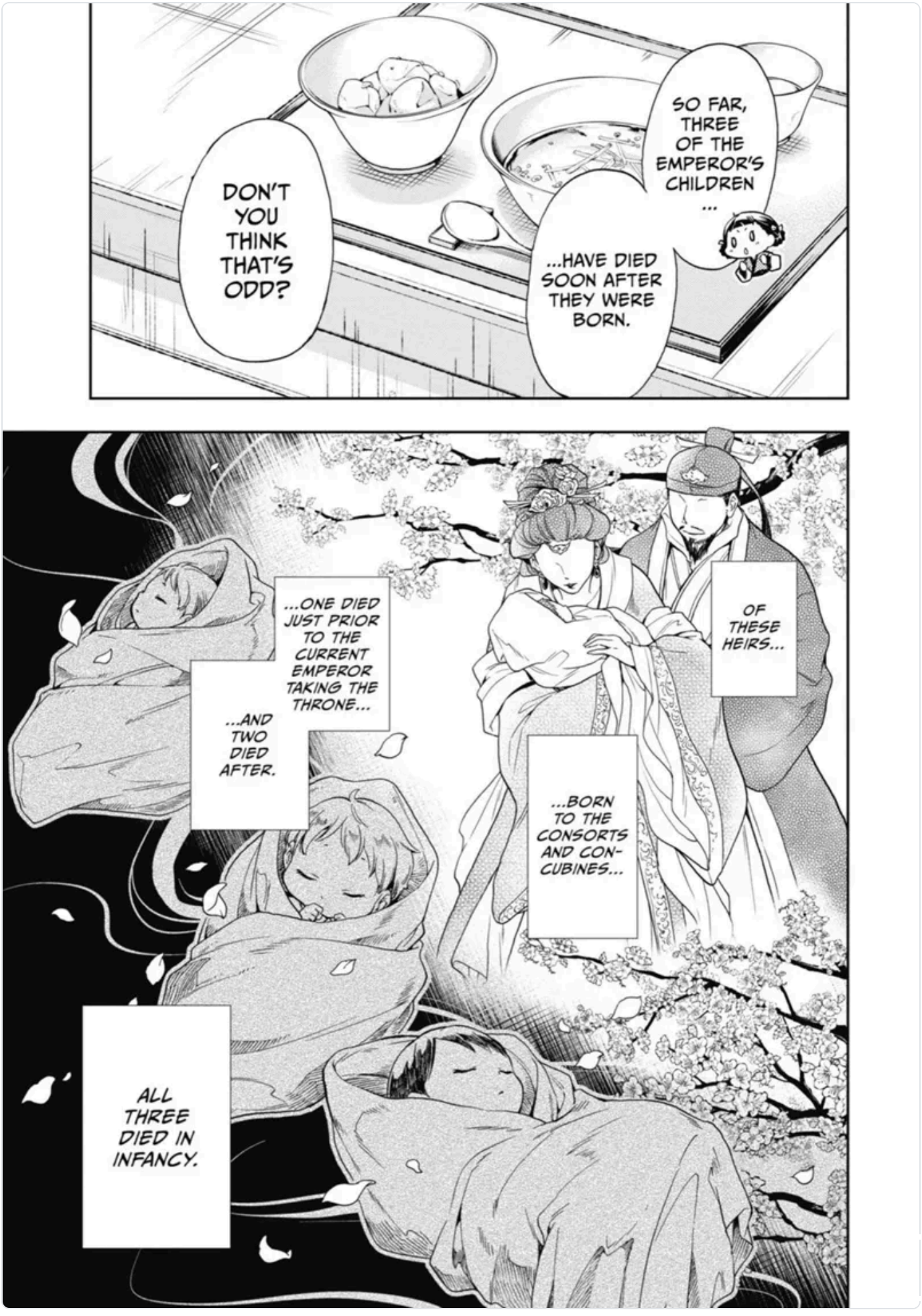
SO...
...I'M FINE STICKING WITH WHAT I'M DOING NOW.
...WHEN ALL'S SAID AND DONE.
EVEN IF YOU CAN READ, IT JUST MEANS THERE'S MORE WORK WAITING FOR YOU...

...WOULD ONLY SERVE TO FURTHER LINE THE POCKETS OF MY ABDUCTORS, AFTER ALL.
AN INCREASE IN MY WAGES...


...ONE MIGHT CALL THIS PREDICTION NAIVE.
UNFOR-TUNATELY, HOWEVER ...
...I'LL GET OUT OF HERE SOONER OR LATER.
IF I KEEP MY HEAD DOWN AND DO MY WORK ...
BAH!

...A BUDDING SENSE OF JUSTICE...
...NOT TO MEN-TION...
...WITH HER INSATIABLE THIRST FOR KNOWLEDGE AND OVER-WHELMING CURIOSITY...
FOR FORWARD-THINKING 17-YEAR-OLD MAO-MAO...
CHATTER カリヤ
...THERE IS NO TELLING WHAT FATE HAS IN STORE.
CHATTER カリヤ
DINING HALL
SO DO YOU THINK IT REALLY IS A CURSE?!
MAIDSERVANT OF THE INNER COURT
XIAOLAN

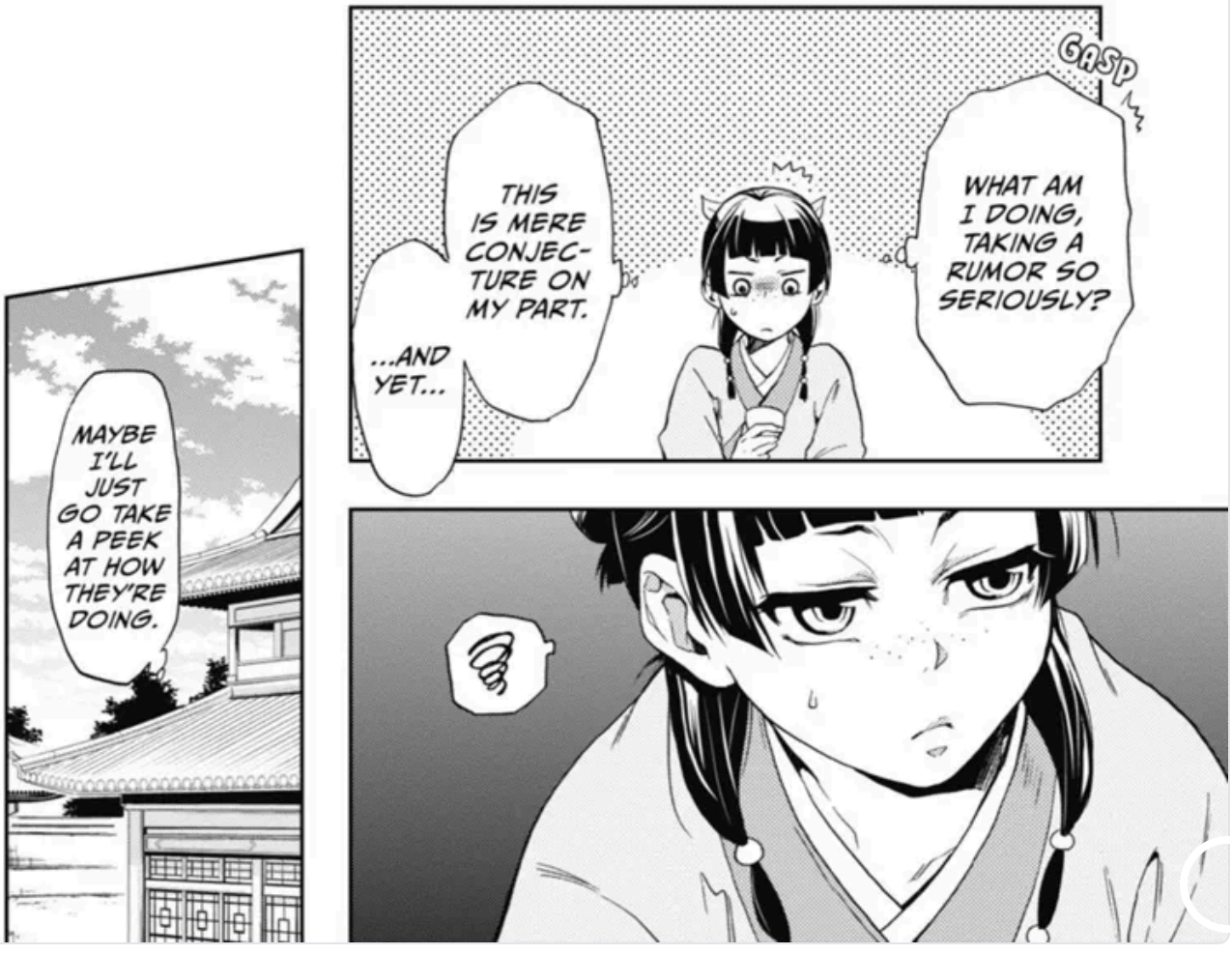
RUMORS SPREAD LIKE WILDFIRE IN THE IMPERIAL COURT.
...WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT?
YOU MEAN YOU HAVEN'T HEARD?!
THE HEIRS BORN IN THE INNER COURT KEEP DYING, ONE AFTER THE OTHER!


DON'T YOU THINK THAT'S ODD?
SO FAR, THREE OF THE EMPEROR'S CHILDREN ...
...HAVE DIED SOON AFTER THEY WERE BORN.
...ONE DIED JUST PRIOR TO THE CURRENT EMPEROR TAKING THE THRONE...
...AND TWO DIED AFTER.
OF THESE HEIRS...
...BORN TO THE CONSORTS AND CON-CUBINES...
ALL THREE DIED IN INFANCY.

...AND A SIX-MONTH-OLD PRINCESS...
...ARE STILL ALIVE.
AT PRES-ENT...
...THE CROWN PRINCE, WHO IS THREE MONTHS OLD...
HOW-EVER...
THE CROWN PRINCE'S MOTHER IS CONSORT LIHUA...
...WHO MAKES HER RESIDENCE IN THE BIGGEST PALACE IN THE INNER COURT.
RIGHT NOW, THE EMPEROR DOESN'T HAVE AN EMPRESS, SO...
...YOU MIGHT SAY THAT THE MOTHER OF THE CROWN PRINCE POSSESSES THE MOST POWER.
...IT SEEMS THE EMPEROR FAVORS...
...CONSORT GYOKUYO, MOTHER TO THE PRINCESS.

IF I WERE TO WAGER A GUESS, PERHAPS DISEASE ...?
OR COULD IT BE THEIR BLOOD-LINE...?
AS BABES STILL IN ARMS, IT'S UNLIKELY THEY WOULD'VE INGESTED POISON.
IF THIS WERE JUST A FIGHT FOR THE THRONE, THERE'D BE NO REASON FOR THE PRINCESS TO BE A TARGET.
IT REALLY MUST BE A CURSE!
YEAH, RIGHT. AS IF CURSES ACTUALLY EXIST.
...BOTH CONSORT GYOKUYO AND CONSORT LIHUA'S RESI-DENCES!
AND I HEARD THAT THE DOCTOR WENT AND CALLED ON...
AAAAGH!
UM...
I DON'T KNOW THE DETAILS...
DO YOU KNOW ...
...HOW THE LAST EMPEROR DIED?
SO CONSORT LIHUA HERSELF IS UNWELL?
IT SEEMS CONSORT LIHUA'S CONDITION IS THE MORE SERIOUS OF THE TWO.
AND NOW SOMETHING SIMILAR'S HAPPENING AGAIN...
...BUT I HEARD EVERYONE GREW WEAKER AND WEAKER DURING HIS TIME.

SO I'M TOLD.
SHE'S BEEN GIVEN TO HEAD-ACHES AND STOMACH PAINS...
...AND HAS EVEN BEEN SUFFERING FROM NAUSEA.
HEADACHES, STOMACHACHES, AND NAUSEA?


GASP
WHAT AM I DOING, TAKING A RUMOR SO SERIOUSLY?
THIS IS MERE CONJEC-TURE ON MY PART.
...AND YET...
MAYBE I'LL JUST GO TAKE A PEEK AT HOW THEY'RE DOING.

THE INNER COURT IS, IN A WORD, HUGE.
IT'S FULL OF PALACES, OUTBUILDINGS, AND COUNTLESS ROOMS.
WITH THE DINING HALLS AND THE GARDENS INCLUDED, THIS PLACE IS EVEN LARGER THAN SOME TOWNS.
EVEN THE INDIVIDUAL PILLARS HERE ARE MORE ELEGANT THAN THOSE ON THE EASTERN SIDE OF THE COURT...
I'D EXPECT NO LESS FROM THE PLACE THAT HOUSES THE OFFSPRING OF THE HIGH-RANKING CONSORTS ...
IT'S BIG ON THE INSIDE TOO.
SLAP
THIS IS ALL YOUR DOING!
HMM?
MURMUR

...SO SURELY YOU KNOW THAT'S NOT TRUE.
MY XIAOLING SUFFERS IN THE SAME WAY...
CONSORT GYOKUYO
YOU BORE A DAUGH-TER...
...SO NOW YOU INTEND TO KILL MY SON WITH THIS VILE CURSE, DON'T YOU?!
CONSORT LIHUA

RECOIL...
THEY'RE AT EACH OTHER'S THROATS.
TH—
THAT QUACK MUST REALLY BE AN IDIOT.
THE EUNUCH TRYING TO GET BETWEEN THEM... IS HE THE PHYSICIAN?
...AFTER TREATING THEM FOR SO LONG?
HOW CAN HE NOT YET HAVE REALIZED IT...

HEADACHES, STOMACH-ACHES, NAUSEA...
INFANT DEATHS ...
AND MOST TELLING OF ALL...
CONSORT LIHUA'S HAGGARD APPEAR-ANCE...
THIS IS ABSO-LUTELY NOT...
...A CURSE OF ANY KIND.

FWIP
THE QUESTION IS... HOW DO I WARN THEM?
HMM.
MUMBLE
...IF ONLY I HAD SOME-THING TO WRITE WITH...

LESS THAN A MONTH AFTER THAT INCIDENT...

...THE CROWN PRINCE PASSED AWAY.

THERE'S NO MEAT IN THIS.
THIS ISN'T NEARLY ENOUGH TO EAT.
THEY DON'T GIVE US MUCH IN THE BEST OF TIMES, BUT STILL...
CHATTER カヤ
CHATTER カヤ

THAT DAY...
...I ATTACHED SIMPLE NOTES TO RHODO-DENDRON BRANCHES ...
...AND LEFT THEM FOR EACH OF THE CON-SORTS.
BUT IT APPEARS THAT MY EFFORTS WERE IN VAIN.
I GUESS ...
SUUURR
...IT JUST GOES TO SHOW HOW TRIVIALLY A MAID'S WARNING IS TAKEN.
AFTER LOSING HER SON, CONSORT LIHUA...
...FADED SO MUCH THAT NOT EVEN A SHADOW...
...OF HER FORMER BEAUTY REMAINS.

I SUPPOSE IT'S ONLY A MATTER OF TIME UNTIL CONSORT GYOKUYO'S DAUGHTER PASSES AWAY AS WELL...
SO...
...SOMEONE LEFT THIS FOR YOU RIGHT AFTER THAT OPEN DISPUTE?
YES.
THAT'S RIGHT.

I AS WELL.
IGNO-RANCE IS A SIN.
I SHOULD HAVE TAKEN MORE CARE...
...OF WHAT COULD GO INTO MY BABY'S MOUTH.
WHO IN THE WORLD LEFT THIS NOTE?
LEAVING THAT ASIDE FOR THE MOMENT ...
MY LADY...
WHAT WILL YOU DO...
...WHEN WE FIND THE SENDER?

WE'RE BEING SUMMON-ED?
HUH?

YOU THERE! YOU HAVE BEEN SUMMONED.
?
ARE THEY SHORT OF HANDS?

PLEASE REPORT TO THE DOMESTIC SERVICE DIRECTOR'S HEADQUAR-TERS.
YES.
I WONDER WHAT'S GOING ON.

GO ON IN.

カ CLACK
カ CLACK
カ CLACK
WHO'S THE HAUGHTY-LOOKING COURT LADY?

OOOH
HM? WAIT, THOSE SHOULDERS ARE PRETTY BROAD.
A MAN?
THAT'S TOO BAD.
SWISH
SWISH
HUH?
!

RAISE
You with the freckles: remain here.
?
?
YOU MAY RETURN TO YOUR POSTS.
THAT'S ALL FOR TODAY.
freckles.
remain here.
34

MARCH
MARCH
GASP
OH, THAT'S RIGHT!!
AM I BEING SINGLED OUT BECAUSE OF SOME MAJOR ERROR?
...THIS CAN'T BE ABOUT THE NOTES, CAN IT?
...I'M THE ONLY MAID IN THIS ROOM WHO CAN READ!!
WHOA, THERE.
ぬっ
LOOM

I AM JINSHI.
COME ALONG QUIETLY, NOW.
GRR...
...HE CAUGHT ME.
I THOUGHT I TOLD YOU TO STAY PUT, HMM?

...
HOW VERY ODD.
YOU'VE BEEN TAKEN FOR AN ILLITERATE THIS ENTIRE TIME.
YES.
I'M OF HUMBLE BIRTH, SO I THINK THERE'S BEEN SOME KIND OF MISTAKE.
AS IF I WOULD ADMIT IT TO YOU!
IT'S EASIER TO GET ALONG IN THE WORLD BY FEIGNING IGNORANCE.
BUT HOW DID HE LEARN ABOUT THE NOTES?!
38

I WAS SURE TO BE MOST CAREFUL...
...BUT PERHAPS I WAS SEEN?
LOOK きょろ
LOOK きょろ
IN WHICH CASE, THE ONLY SHRED HE HAD TO GO ON WAS "A SHORT WOMAN WITH FRECKLES!"
SO HE WENT TO THE TROUBLE OF SUMMONING ALL US MAIDS, ILLITERATE OR NOT...
SEETHE ぬぬぬ
WHAT A SKEPTIC!
...NOT TO MENTION, HE HAS FAR TOO MUCH TIME ON HIS HANDS!
FUME ぎぎぎ
KNOCK KNOCK
PARDON ME, MY LADY.
DO COME IN.
I HAVE BROUGHT THE MAID IN QUESTION.
SO WHAT NOW?

THANK YOU FOR TAKING THE TIME TO FIND HER.
SMILE
ニコ…!

BOW
ペコリ
!
I HAVE DONE NOTHING TO WARRANT MY LADY HUMBLING HERSELF!
?!
THAT ISN'T SO.
A BOW DOES NOT EVEN BEGIN TO CONVEY THE DEPTH OF MY GRATITUDE TO YOU.
YOU ARE THE ONE WHO SAVED MY DAUGHTER'S LIFE.

I BELIEVE MY LADY MIGHT BE MISTAKING ME FOR ANOTHER.
THERE APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN SOME KIND OF MISUNDER-STANDING.
AHEM!
NOW WHERE DID IT GO...?
JOLT
RUSTLE
CONSORT GYOKUYO ENTRUSTED A CERTAIN SOMETHING INTO MY CARE, YOU SEE.
RUSTLE
SWISH
すっ
HERE WE ARE.

DOES THIS CLOTH LOOK TO YOU LIKE IT'S FROM A MAIDSERVANT'S UNIFORM?
face powder is poison
"THE FACE POWDER IS POISON. DO NOT EXPOSE YOUR BABY TO IT."
IN-DEED.
COULD BE, NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT.
YOUR SKIRT WOULDN'T HAPPEN TO BE MISSING A PIECE, WOULD IT?
ぱっ FWIP
IT BELONGS TO THE UNIFORM OF A SHANG-FU MAID.*
ギク JOLT
*SHANG-FU: WARDROBE SERVICES, SUCH AS LAUNDRY.
43

HE'S WORKED THIS MUCH OUT ALREADY. I'D BEST COME CLEAN.
THAT DAY...
...I DEDUCED WHAT HAD KILLED THE EMPEROR'S HEIRS...
...AND SENT WORD TO BOTH CON-SORTS.
IT'S SIMPLE, REALLY.
JUST DISCONTINUE USE OF THAT EXPENSIVE FACE POWDER WITH THE TOXIC INGREDIENTS.

IN THE PLEASURE DISTRICT, WHERE I ONCE LIVED...
...THERE WERE MANY COURTESANS WHO USED THE SAME.

MOST OF THEM...
...ULTIMATELY LOST THEIR LIVES TO THE POISON IN THIS STUFF, WHICH ATE AWAY AT THEM UNTIL THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT.

I JUST...
...HAPPENED TO SEE FIRSTHAND THE FATE THAT AWAITED THE COURTE-SANS...
...WHO REFUSED TO STOP WEARING THE POWDER.
THEY WEIGHED THEIR LIVES EQUALLY WITH THEIR BEAUTY ...
...AND FOR THAT, THEY LOST BOTH.
I WAS REMINDED OF WHAT HAPPENED TO THEM. THAT'S ALL.

I WAS ONCE AN APOTH-ECARY, YOU SEE...
SO...
ER...
WH...
WHAT WOULD MY LADY HAVE ME DO NOW?
RESIGNED TO HER FATE
WELL...
...IN THIS CASE...

...YOU'LL BE MY NEW LADY-IN-WAITING!
...FROM THIS DAY FORTH...
UH...
HUH ...?
WELL, I GUESS YOU MIGHT SAY I'VE GOTTEN MYSELF A PROMO-TION.